



Coraddi





# C o r a d d i

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Shawn Linehan



## Tuesdays Off

**I** let PJ love me anywhere. He comes to me real close, anywhere at all, slides his hand into mine, squeezes. That's how he asks. I don't mind much—brings me alive again. I can count on PJ always coming and squeezing my hand. He says he's there for me, especially in my weakest moments. He says he never shifts. Just watch him. He stays still.

Things are shifting again. Kids quitting the restaurant, off to their schools, tourists leaving, back to their careers, everyone wanting part-time again. I watch how PJ doesn't let the shifting get him. Now I'm watching PJ watch the dessert maker, Fran. PJ lives with Fran now, husband and wife. Sometimes I want to ask her if she lets PJ love her anywhere. Shifting again.

PJ comes into my walk-in salad cooler while I'm pouring Jell-O into pans. I jump, Jell-O slops over the sides. He walks in circles, scrunches his cook's hat in his hands. Asks me why Fran's doing this? He can't figure out the problem. "Why do I stay with her, Cally? She's always changing the rules. Tell me," he says, and grabs my shoulders. I say we're not the same person. Go ask her. Let me go, I tell him. Please.

"You've always helped before, Cal," he says real low. I break from his grip because I'm a strong girl, you know. "I mean you should know, you're a girl." I don't resist when he pulls me close and kisses me. Kisses me like I am a girl. Like I'm a girl and he's a boy and making it there in the cooler with the smell of lime Jell-O going through the cold air because Fran doesn't appreciate him is all there is. Just like that.

"That's enough help," I say. As usual, I tell him we shouldn't kiss anymore, try saying it decisively. Tell him he's got Fran for that. He says me and him, we're just habit. Rubs his hand down my arm. Says you've got to have more strength than that to break habits.

"Don't be so nervous, so sensitive about everything," he says. "It'll break you. Who really cares?"

"Fran cares," I say. But I'm getting better at not thinking about Fran. Makes it easier when PJ takes my hand, squeezes it. Just habit.

"Fran's a hard woman, Cally," he says. "Takes a lot to get to her." I can still picture her expression the day PJ and me were in the freezer together. He said it'd

be exciting; Fran said nothing. I was just cold, inside and outside, when Fran looked me right in the eyes and I looked her back. We came out one at a time so no one would know. Both of our faces were pink.

"I got to go, PJ."

"Why didn't it work for us?" He looks at me hoping I'll tell him. He knew it was something important back then, but now he can't remember.

"I don't know," I say. But it was me. I didn't work for us. I left once to find a real job after high school, something more. Didn't know what kind of job, didn't belong at college, and PJ wouldn't leave, never needed to leave. Just a job that you don't have to wear a uniform, or smell like beets or carrot salad when you come home. No luck. PJ said I was too young, wasn't ready for it all yet. He held me close, made sure I didn't crumble. He sent me back to making salads at the restaurant, said stop feeling bad about it, you're so emotional. It's just a job, he'd say. What's in a job, Cal?

"Time has passed," he says. "Just tell me this is where you're staying and we could always help each other."

"My plans are coming together, PJ." I say the line real confident, like he'd say one of his. Everyone there knows I'm stuck. Been with the restaurant so long I'm part of it now. Even belong to the kitchen's weekly lottery pool. For people who stay as long as me, winning the lottery's the only way you're going to get out. "Your plans are with Fran."

"She wants Tuesdays off. Wants me to work and her to have Tuesdays off. Spending all our time together is too stifling or something. Said she needs time to herself. What for, Cally?"

"I don't know." Boy, that blows me away. Never heard of anyone *wanting* to be alone before. I try to picture what she'd do by herself. And I think of how I pull into the parking lot at night and see my apartment light off, think of how nobody's waiting, wanting for me. I go into the apartment, turn on lights, TV, the radio, get the shower running, make as much noise as possible. Can't imagine why Fran would want to hear silence.

"We'll work together on Tuesdays," he says, kisses me again.

"Like old times, Cal."

I have to drive Fran home. She said she wants Tuesdays off and by God if today isn't Tuesday. She cleared it with the manager, but PJ won't give her the car keys.

"I got to get home," PJ says. They're fighting in the middle of the kitchen. People walking in and out, some stay in the back, watch and laugh.

"You'll manage," Fran says. She doesn't say please, doesn't ask PJ sweetly. Just says she wants to go.

"You can't take Cally with you," PJ says. He's chopping frozen fish apart. Making loud sounds that make me jump. Fran doesn't.

"You keep the car," she says. She takes her hair out of a bun. It spills everywhere, makes her look sort of soft and pretty. "Cally's driving me home."

She's leaving, just like that. Pushes me to the door. I look back, PJ's confused. "Fran," he says. "You can't just take my help like that."

She does.

I don't like being alone with Fran. I keep fiddling with the radio. It's me acting emotional again, nervous. Try to think how PJ would act so I don't say anything stupid. I can't tell who Fran's trying to act like. She says I got the jitters.

"Everyone gets them, Cally." She rolls the window down. You can tell she's older than PJ and me with the sun on her face.

"Bet you never got one jitter before."

"Got them now."

"No, get out of here," I say. She blows me away. I can't see them at all. I think she practices acting like PJ too. He only has two reactions; romance and anger.

"Us strong women hide them well, right?" She smiles at me.

Makes me uncomfortable like she wants me to confess I'm not her kind of strong.

"I lift things pretty well." I feel dumb saying it. It's the only thing I know to say back. "Get all my own produce when I need it. Those big cases of lettuce, the bags of carrots, they weigh fifty pounds, you know."

"Yeah, you're strong like that." I'm looking at her, almost ready to stop the car. Just stop the car, give her the keys, give her the whole damn car, tell her I'll walk back. Then this truck cuts in front of me.

"Asshole," I say, blow my horn loud.

"You talk like a man," she says. I smile, want to thank her but she doesn't look like she means it nicely. That dumb feeling comes over me again.

"Guy cut me off," I say. PJ never explains his actions but I'm not as good as him yet. "Look, he's trying to deal with that brat kid." The little boy's in the front seat. He's playing around, keeps patting his daddy on top of his head. Fran's throwing me this weird look like I'm so rude for calling the guy an asshole. I've seen her give the look to PJ. "What are

you going to do with Tuesdays off?"

"Needlepoint," she says, just like that. I can't picture it. Fran, with those muscles in her arms, sitting in a chair with her long, soft hair everywhere, doing some old lady's needlepoint.

"Hear it takes a lot of patience." The truck drifts into the grass. We're both watching it. The brat's just pounding on Daddy's head. Daddy removes brat's hand. Brat pounds again. "I started when I thought I was pregnant," Fran says. "It was going to hang on the wall. I used pink yarn, made little flowers. I knew it was a girl."

"What did PJ say?"

"Make sure."

"That's all?" But I know that's how he said it. I can see them lying in bed. PJ wants to get on top of her. Fran takes his hand, rubs it over her stomach. Says no, there's someone inside. I don't want to hurt her. PJ doesn't understand. She explains. Pregnant. We're having a girl, she says. PJ kisses her on the cheek, careful not to touch her much now. Rolls over, turns out the light. Make sure, he says. Will you?

Just like that.

"I had all the signs," she says. "Sick as a dog, late, my tits as big as melons. The doctor said no. No, nothing's in you." She's staring at the brat in the truck, pounding Daddy's head into his shoulder.

"Maybe next time." I want to get out of here, get away from Fran. Tell her she doesn't even have to return the car. I'll just start walking and probably end up at the restaurant. We watch the brat rest his hand on top of Daddy's head, just leaves it there like it belongs. He lays his head on Daddy's shoulder.

It's killing Fran.

"PJ wants me to get that operation. Where you can't have kids," Fran says. "They tie your tubes. PJ said just get it fixed. Said he doesn't want me to hurt again."

"That sounds sensible," I say. It's not the right thing to say to Fran, but I know it sounds sensible for PJ. Try to think if I could say that to my wife. I'd have to say it because she couldn't take the hurt, she'd break. Hold her close when she says it was a false alarm. I'd feel the shaking, then realize it's me who has the jitters. I'd say why don't you get fixed, honey. Squeeze her tighter. She'd be so still. I can't let you go through this again. Wonder if that's what I'd say.

"Don't you ever want anything, Cally?" Fran asks. I feel her look at me. Don't like it much. "Don't you want something to call your own?"

I turn down the wrong street to get away from the truck.

Fran only acts real loving to PJ when she's drunk. Saturday night, Fran's all over PJ and she's not drinking. I'm watching them shoot pool. She's not drinking tonight, says she doesn't want to. PJ's nervous, keeps



trying to hand her his beer. He's not believing it, just not believing that Fran's acting loving to him when she's sober. And I know he's thinking that's what I got Cally for.

"Help me make this shot," Fran says to PJ. He steps behind her, holds her hand on the pool stick. They move the stick back and forth and hit the ball together.

"Perfect, baby," PJ says, kisses Fran when the ball goes in.

She lets him kiss her in public.

"I'll rack them for you," Fran says. PJ's looking all over her. I am too. He's having trouble figuring her out. She doesn't look like Fran in that skirt, make-up, hair all loose.

"I'll go get some beers," PJ says. He looks at me and I nod my head. I'm trying to keep up with him in beers.

"Not me, PJ," Fran says.

"Come on, baby, just one," PJ says. He's wanting it to last, last forever. He doesn't know why Fran's acting like this, doesn't really matter as long as he can keep it going. "Fran, we always drink together."

"Not tonight. I can't. Anyhow, drinking's not good for my insides."

"Not good? Yes you can, Fran. You're not pregnant," PJ says, and holds her by the shoulders. "Nothing's in your way. Nothing's changed. Let's go back to drinking together like always."

"Something has changed, PJ."

"I made a doctor's appointment, honey," he says, loosens the grip on her shoulders. "About the operation. Just to see, Fran."

"Just to see, PJ."

PJ goes to the bar then brings me my beer. He's still looking at Fran, looking like he doesn't see me at all. "I'm keeping right up with you in beers, PJ."

"Yeah."

"Want to dance, PJ?"

"No, not now." He slaps my back hard. "Fran needs me."

He goes back to her. Fran sips at the beer. PJ gives her the pool stick and Fran moves like she's going to take a shot. Instead she buries her head in PJ's chest and they just stand still. I watch PJ close his eyes slow so he can feel her better. He's right there for her. And I get this sick feeling, way down there, in my gut, thinking he always will be.

I hear the group of kids across the room. They're from the college, their shirts and hats say so. They're sprawled all across two tables, girls and boys, some couples, some just friends.

I'm watching the girls. Some are just plain drunk,

laying their heads in their boyfriends' laps. He strokes her arm, tries to feel her up when nobody's looking. Some are nervous, sipping their drinks, thinking about just how drunk they want to get. Lots of them are pretty, some you can see the jitters just jumping around them, some look like they can hold their own. None of them look like they got all those things together. None look like Fran.

You can hear the boys. Loud and clear, they are jabbing at each other, swearing, singing, and arm wrestling. They all look big and secure. They all look free and protective. They all look like PJ. I go watch the two guys arm wrestle. They're struggling and moaning, veins popping out of their necks, but it looks more for show. Everyone's cheering Rick and Ed real loud, Rick and Ed they say. Rick's about to knock himself out trying to get Ed's arm on the table. Ed's fighting back when Rick closes his eyes, slaps Ed's arm down on the table. Rick gets up to a round of backslapping. The noise rings in my head, and flashes of Rick spin in front of me. Ed sits with his head on the table.

I sit in Rick's seat.

I'm really gone because of drinking like PJ. I'm feeling awful with Fran and PJ getting along, so I sit.

"Hey there, sweetie," Rick looks up and says. "You want a piece of the champ?"

"Let's dance," I say. I say it to have someone hold me, make me stop feeling awful. I'm looking as sweet and soft as I can, put my arm out for him to take my hand. The crowd gathers again. They start to chant, Rick, Rick again. They're all around us, but nobody's chanting my

name. I want him to take me in a corner somewhere alone, pretend we're dancing.

"Come on," Rick says, and I'm thinking finally we'll be alone. "Let's go." Rick puts his elbow on the table.

"You're kidding," I say.

"Think you're tough, sweetie," he says, moves his fingers up and down. "Maybe you need this." He puts his hand in mine.

Someone says go and Rick nearly knocks me over. I resist, but I want to use my other hand, use my whole body. I can't.

Rick's as serious as hell. He's concentrating, struggling, his neck muscles popping out. He's acting like he needs to win this, like he'll just fade away if he doesn't win this one.

And I'm feeling big. Thinking like PJ, feeling him in me.

Got Rick's hand almost to the table. Crowd's



silent, they're not believing this. I'm thinking how right PJ was the night he told me to know a man you've got to get inside him. I'm thinking I'll never need to get out.

"Yeah, you're strong like that." I try not to hear it.

It's Fran's voice. Rick pounds my hand to the table. The crowd comes to life. I feel like fading away.

•

Fran's splashing water on my face in the ladies' bathroom.

I grab her wrists, tell her to stop. Try to squeeze them tight, but she breaks loose. Blows me away. I decide not to mess with her, she'd probably lay me flat.

"What's the matter with you, playing like a man?" she asks.

She stops pouring water on me. Takes a paper towel, rubs a spot on her blouse. PJ probably spilled beer.

I'm sitting there really gone and she asks me what's the matter. I think of telling her, but all I can picture is PJ lying beside me asking what's wrong. I tell him I think I'm losing things. Every time I'm with him I lose something else. He says he didn't take anything. Says we'll look for it in the morning. I try to tell him it's not something you can pick up, but I just say never mind. It's me being silly again.

"Aren't you going to say anything, woman?" Fran asks.

"Don't call me that."

"You'll always be a woman. No getting out of that," she says, looks at the spot in the mirror. "But who knows what kind."

"I need PJ back." I get up and face her so she'll see how I mean it.

"Don't talk stupid." That's all she says. No shock, no anger. Goes back to looking at the spot on her blouse.

I'm ready to break. Jitters crawling all over. I think about crying, how easy it would be to go to pieces. And Fran, what kind of woman would that make me?

"We had something," I say. "Fran, I'm trying to tell you, we have something."

"I know," she says, and goes into a stall. She's unrolling toilet paper when PJ comes in.

"Cally, baby," he says, throws his arms around me. I can see he went on drinking beers without me. "What are you doing here? Let's not waste time." He starts for my zipper when Fran walks out.

"I think you've had enough, PJ," Fran says.

PJ raises his hands in the air like he's under arrest. He tries to talk, but he doesn't know which word to use first. He starts to move to Fran but then drops to the floor, out cold.

"This is what you have?" Fran asks.

•

We can't wake PJ up. He's snoring now. We're

dragging him to the car, and Fran's not saying a word. She won't tell me how much she knows, won't get angry with me, not even blaming PJ. And I'm wondering what it takes to hold it all in.

"Fran, I want to explain," I say.

"Help me push him in." I push PJ's feet into the back seat.

Fran's inside, pulling the rest of him in.

"Just let me tell you," I say. We get into the front seat.

The parking lot's dark and empty. I can't see Fran's face. "Anything coming?"

"No." We're pulling out of the parking lot. I'm fiddling with the radio station again, changing it even when there's a good song on.

"You're always so nervous, Cally."

"I want to apologize." I switch the radio to AM and start turning the dial.

"It's going to be rough always being a nervous woman."

"There's a lot to be scared of out there."

"Tell me, Cally just what is out there?" Fran's looking at me, I can feel it. She's waiting for an answer, waiting for me to tell her what I've seen, what I've overcome.

"I'm not like you, Fran. I'm not your kind of strong."

"No, Cally," she says. She turns off the radio. I feel her hand on mine. "You're not even your own kind."

We just sit there, riding in silence. I wonder how I'd do without the restaurant, without Fran, without anyone squeezing my hand. I look out the window, realize just how dark it is. I can see it tomorrow. I'll be getting ready to put eggs on the stove when PJ comes up to me. Fran won't even be there. She'll be in church. She tells people PJ isn't going to save her so she better ask God. I get three flats of eggs out of the box. PJ says he's sorry about last night, too many beers. I'm putting eggs in the pot. On the side of the box there's big letters that read "handle with care" so I lay the eggs down so softly, real gentle. PJ says Fran's not talking to him because of him passing out. He asks me if he really snored. I'll be thinking of Fran kneeling down with her hands together saying, "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy." Then one of the eggs slips, falls into the pot. I think it's ruined, spilling yolk everywhere, but you can hardly see the crack. It holds together, trying not to spill out. I look up at PJ and he smiles, takes my hand, squeezes. I'm wondering about Fran, thinking about what she prays for. Then I tell PJ I need Tuesdays off, just like that.

I can picture it.



David Hervey

## Plant Gardens or Liberty for the American Woman

Jennifer Weaver

---

Start low

in the soft earth.  
Let the moist soil crumble  
and fall between your fingers,  
dry and cake under your fingernails.  
Plant rows of corn and cotton,  
then soybeans and sunflowers.

Go slow

about your planting.  
Be careful to sink your seeds deep,  
and make sure the rain is enough.  
Bring water in buckets from your well,  
if you must,  
to make your vegetables grow.

Rise high

to watch the sun at noon,  
caught between green leaves  
and the new breeze.  
Rise at night to watch pumpkin  
and gourd grow by harvest moonlight.  
Plant exotic spores  
of rare mushrooms from Delaware.  
Smell the trumpet honeysuckle like  
mornings after rain.

Strike fire

if the climate is cold.  
Burn fallen wood to keep your trees alive,  
then plant saplings.

Sit down

under orchards full of peaches  
when you have finished.  
Rest.  
Come to our round wooden table,  
warm in the midst of open windows,  
expecting to learn.



Neil Hinson

## Gore Vidal's *Live From Golgotha*

**I**t's easy to envision Gore Vidal's mind-tingling excitement when the idea for this novel came into his head. A premise that would enable the author to skewer both modern-day America and its Christian ancestry couldn't seem more tantalizing to a man like Vidal, the literary expatriate with a disdain for monotheism. Put simply, Vidal muses about what would happen if a television network found a way to propel themselves back in time to film the Crucifixion. The idea is a tempest in itself, a white-hot query that speeds Vidal's confident prose to its taboo-tickling, time-bending finale. In the process of bringing this idea to sarcastic life, he skewers the media, Shirley MacClaine, the Apostles, Oral Roberts, Mary Baker Eddy, the Trinity, Zionism, and at the book's biting core, Jesus himself.

In *Live From Golgotha*, the technology of the near future has found a way to travel back in time, or, more exactly, to send holograms back, as well as inanimate objects. The Bishop Timothy is greeted one day with a Sony TV and an urgent message from the future. It seems that a hacker has gotten into the computer disks of The New Testament, quickly eating away the writings of all the Apostles, including the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. As there are no other versions of these works (books seem to have fallen out of favor), the truths therein are in danger of being eradicated, twisted by the virus so that St. Mark's Gospel says, "Jesus was married at twenty and had twins, and was into gambling, and so on." A gentleman from NBC commissions Timothy (Timmy to the familiar), to write his own account and hide it in a broom closet, where it can be found in the future and restore Christianity its sensibilities.

Timothy begins writing, while quickly becoming addicted to the information deluge of CNN emanating from the Sony. We follow him in his travels with Saint Paul (known only as "Saint" throughout), his lover, on his missionary journeys for Christianity. Just so you understand the tone of Vidal's novel, Saint Paul is presented as a tap-dancing, lecherous showman with a huge Rolodex and is called the original master of "the follow-up letter." To add stress to the plot, the Hacker himself comes back through time, jeopardizing Timothy's account of the Crucifixion.

Through it all, Vidal pushes at our comfortable notions of Jesus and his disciples—making Paul's vision of Jesus one of a man who is "wide as He is tall," having Paul constantly chasing Timothy and his "two centimeters of rose-velvety foreskin," remarking that Jesus' only insight was pushing a freer form of capitalism by lowering the prime rate, and finally by saying that the Crucifixion of Jesus never actually happened at all. The narrative voice of Timothy is hilariously sarcastic throughout, never losing its modern-day tone and lustful preoccupations, making this rather small novel at least enjoyable. Its strength is in its ridiculing of our media-laden world, its thirst for images and hype, with contracts and facelifts abounding. Unfortunately, Vidal is a bit late to the punch for the satire to really stick. Though funny, his sarcasm of our world is rather familiar, and tired. More directly the very speed and short-handedness with which he writes the novel are indicative of the same image-oriented society he parodies. More than that, Vidal is a hot item within this culture himself—running for Senate twice and currently waxing sentimental as the defeated liberal in the film, *Bob Roberts*. He is the very paper dragon that he intends to slay.

His intention in this book is to tumble down the sanctity of Zionism in general. In his depiction of the Apostles we see a den of money-driven zealots fighting for the copyright of our Messiah. Jesus proves to be a bit of a fanatic, promising to light up our world in a holocaust-like Second Coming. The novel is tasteless, cruel, two-dimensional, and cynical, but that's okay, because within the world of this novel that's an accurate representation of these characters, and moreover that is Vidal's honest opinion of Zionism and its Messiah. There is, however, an incompleteness, an emptiness, to these portrayals that gives one the impression that Vidal really hasn't considered the Christian experience. While Vidal goes to great pains to ironically present this ancient world as sullied, political, and perverse with his exaggerated characters and misinterpreted events, he ignores the embedded irony of the Crucifixion—the morbid images of skulls and thieves and ladies embracing Jesus' post-mortem body, stiff with rigor mortis. Christianity is a myth that Vidal has failed to present both sides of (it is noteworthy that his



satire is dependent upon the Crucifixion never having actually happened; that is to say he is denying the archetypal reality inherent in this allegory), and his novel suffers from his being short-handed. It reads as the work of a cynic too long bubbling in his own fly bottle, deafened by his own rages. In the past, Vidal has opened the reader's mind by presenting the likes of Aaron Burr in a humanistic light, shattering the general icon with his perspective. *Live From Golgotha* is just the opposite. He asks us to consider only the element of Christianity that suits his confident distaste, and in doing so denies his novel even the gift of real characters.

There is one flesh and blood man in the story, though. He is Petronius, a man who, like Vidal, sings the songs of his leaders but soon commits suicide at the state of things. It is a tender, sincere snapshot told with obvious empathy. Perhaps Vidal can play him in the movie.



Revival,  
or Jacob vs. the Angel

---

Heidi Czerwicz

Grandad tried to pound Satan out  
of the TV on rocks, so that

Satan bought that round  
but the next was on him, pounding

Grandad's head with hangovers  
While Grandmother

made coffee, black,  
and sat decaying  
in the back  
of the frayed

living room—a little emptier, now.



Matthew Curtis

## Fool's Gold

---

Beth W. Baldwin

Never panned a gold nugget  
on the banks of Sutter's stream;

no Mother's vein ever bled  
at the prick of my tools;

Uncle Sam never mistook me for a woman  
to whom he'd made a promise,  
a wage was owed  
but never paid in legal tender;

but I recollect with ease  
the contour and weight of each  
illusion pressed into my palm,

the luster of fool's gold  
reflecting sunlight;

times I rose from the mud  
or crawled from the cave

eager to share  
my handful of charms  
my burden of counterfeit treasure.

## Found Poem

---

Chuck Hall

"What did it sound like?"

"Silence. . .

There was silence,  
nobody,  
there was nothing,  
there was silence.

When I got out of my car,  
quiet,  
and. . .  
It was quite graphic, though.  
But there were no sounds."

"Quite graphic meaning. . . ?

"There was  
Blood  
all over the road.  
As I got out of my car,  
in front of me  
there was

A Brain  
of a person,  
quivering  
on the ground  
by itself.  
You asked, that's it!"

(Taken from a newspaper report concerning the San Francisco earthquake of October 1990. The report excerpts part of a CBS interview with a quake victim/witness.)



## For the Passenger next to me

---

Marta D. King

"How red is red?"  
you asked.  
I answered,  
"blood."

I do not know why  
the blood sun loves us,  
but we tilt in its circle,  
and tilting,  
tilt into each star,  
each red star.

This plane whispers:  
"I will carry you."  
I cry:  
"What if you fall—"  
This plane unblinking says:  
"Those clouds would catch me."  
I laugh.  
I've always thought  
clouds were sturdy.

And in this brown-flying seat,  
this moment

they are.

## Helga

Marta D. King

He must have loved her  
Really loved her  
To paint each strand  
a separate thread of gold  
of moonshine  
of thought  
of sunlight  
rich soup you ache to taste  
when the scent reaches you  
through an open kitchen window

He must have wanted to bite her hair  
To swallow her  
To know what she felt like  
inside of him

I'd never seen  
anyone paint hair  
like Wyeth painted  
his neighbor's hair  
He painted his heart  
on her head  
and down her back  
in yellows and browns and white





Elizabeth Fitzsimmons



Rich Buchanan



Larry Murrell



D



is for dragon.



J.J. Rudisill



San San Lee



San San Lee

# Lou Ann Hicks











Tim Smith

Rebecca Russell

## A Review of Donald Barthelme's *The King*

**F**irst Malory, then Tennyson, and now in the interest of modernity and cynicism, "a retelling of *Le Morte d'Arthur*" combines the golden age of chivalry with political figures from World War II. In its second printing since the author's death in 1989, Donald Barthelme's *The King* parodies our worship of appearance over truth and true heroes in an enlightened, witty farce.

His forte is presenting man's collective soul as a complex, malleable essence. In *The King*, he examines it with such wit, in the classical sense of intelligence, and modern sense of humor, that we laugh at his characters and then realize that we are not just chuckling at time honored legends we ourselves created but are in fact laughing at ourselves. He pokes fun at Malory—at one point everybody swoons—and he creates a world where the existence of Arthur after hundreds of years is justified.

Barthelme does not change our historical reality, he amends it. Arthur and his knights are being faced with a paradigm shift, a shift that Barthelme points out by merging the societies and sensibilities to contrast the two time periods.

Take, for example, Merlin's prophecy. Malory's twenty-volume work has Arthur meeting his death at the hand of his son Mordred, as predicted in Arthur's dream by the ghost of Sir Gareth. Once upon a time these things were taken seriously, and the dramatic irony of Malory was that Arthur was trying to follow the advice of the prophecy and died in a warrior's loophole. In the twentieth century, the prophecy is in Merlin's sixth book, but instead of following it's original interpretation, Arthur amends it:

"I must confess something," said Arthur. "After I showed it to you, I got to thinking about it, the Prophecy, and, well, the short form is, I altered a few lines here and there."

"You tampered with Merlin's Prophecy?" "Yes. I had him predict a slightly more favorable outcome. It's a skill he taught me himself, altering history. Even Caesar used to do it when he read the auguries, you know. He'd diddle the chicken bones, as it

were, so that when cast they'd indicate victory for his legions."

"An offense against scholarship, among other things," said Sir Kay.

"All part of kingship," said Arthur. "In a *crise* the king holds nothing sacred—not the past, not the future, and especially not dead mountebanks."

That's exactly what Barthelme does; he holds nothing sacred. In one passage, he questions our accepted superficial models of leadership, scholarship, and especially our conceptions of heroes. His characters do not take themselves or their images as seriously as they have in literature of the past. In this regard, Guinevere is the most modern character, responding to attacks of the press (Lord Haw Haw in Berlin and "Ezra" in Italy) about her affair with Lancelot with humor instead of shame:

"Guinevere is a good woman, at heart," said the radio.

"How does he know?"

"But women are often confused," said Haw Haw. "Also, she's getting older. Very often, when women get older, they get a little reckless."

"Not reckless enough," Guinevere said.

Barthelme's treatment of the legendary love affair marks the difference between the way we used to look at our heroes and the way we do now. Malory, hesitant to incriminate the valiant Sir Lancelot or make King Arthur a cuckold, says, "And whether they were abed or at other manner of disports, me list not thereof make no mention, for love that time was not as love is nowadays." In Barthelme's version, Sir Kay comes to Arthur on that very theme and is put off:

"... The entire English-speaking world believes that Lancelot is sleeping with Guinevere."

"Oh, I doubt it," said Sir Kay. "She's thirty-six. Do people still sleep with

women when they're that age?"

"Each to his own taste," said the king.

"I have not lain with Guinevere these dozen years. Not that I'm not fond of her, you understand. But twenty-four is my absolute upper limit. Always was and always will be."

"Quite sound," said Sir Kay. "Perhaps it's a sort of pietistic relationship, Lancelot and the queen. Perhaps they read improving works together, go to early mass together, make novenas, things of that nature."

"Guinevere has no more religion than a cat."

The fact is that they do quite blatantly sleep together, as she also does with a Scottish lad. But in the modern world, no one accuses either of them of treason. Honor is defined differently now, and Arthur's is not tarnished by Guinevere's infidelity. So the world accepts such mild scandal as gossip and entertainment, but little else.

The moguls of the past are human, as is the Churchill of the present. Not even he is safe from the ridicule of Barthelme, as Arthur blames him for the state of the war (they're losing—the United States has yet to enter):

"The tide will turn."

"No it won't," said Arthur. "It's Winston. He's laboring under the impression he's running things. Have you seen the war room he's dug for himself under Whitehall. . . damndest thing I ever saw. . ."

"He's not really a military feller," Lancelot said. "Not as we conceive such. Although I suppose the navy is a military force, of a kind. He's lost us a couple of battleships, I hear."

Our heroes are no longer chivalrous warriors who combine courage, wit, and charisma to fight bravely. They are political. The world is political. The ideals and concepts of heroism and leadership that have been handed down through literature have changed, and are changing.

As Arthur quotes Tennyson himself, "The war of Time against the soul of man," is being waged on Barthelme's battlefield. Arthur and his knights, our legendary outdated role models, know that they are losing their place in the world. Their heroism comes not from their deeds, but acceptance of their fate, just as our heroism as a species will come from adapting to the changes that lay ahead of us in the next thousand years.

# A. Doren















## H

**E**b. F. Ab. G. Bb. Humming the notes to my piano solo, I sluggishly return to the sleepy classroom. FG. Why did the music creators stop at G? Only eight letters out of twenty-six got to have notes attached to them when music was created. And all I keep thinking about is the H. H was so close. Even P gets to be seen on sheet music abbreviating “piano” for “soft” every once in a while—but not H. It’s about as loud as a jellyfish. The ones who created music worked nonstop in a huge factory. They spread a separate tone as thick as honey onto each letter taking care not to let any of the music ooze onto the floor. They kept spreading it all night until they finished with the letter G. One woman wiped the sweat off the back of her neck and sat down to rest. The others followed her lead and relaxed for the first time also, twisting the lids onto the jars filled with sticky music and wiping their hands on white aprons. Except the H was still left on the conveyor belt. Somebody help the H. Sighing, the music creators slipped on their outdoor coats and blew out the tall candles. “We’re finished,” they said, and returned home. And the H just sat there waiting in silence. So today it has nowhere on the staff to hang from and sits in the regular alphabet line up between G and I, known as the first letter of the alphabet not to have a musical tone. Maybe that’s why the French don’t pronounce it in words like l’hopital and l’hotel.

Approaching the classroom door, I hear the sing-song voice of Mrs. Buffalo Head. “What makes humans distinct from other mammals?” Her voice echoes through the hall condescendingly. I fiddle with the bathroom pass. It’s in the shape of an oversized key and covered by thick plastic created by one of the most amazing machines ever—the laminator. It’s incredible to me to be able to put paper into a machine and have it return with a clear blanket on both sides and sealed together. A veritable pig-in-a-clear blanket. Nothing can ever alter it, the paper inside never changes or becomes faded. I’d like to put myself through the school laminator one day. Just hop in, fingers first, and glide through the rollers. To be protected on all sides by warm plastic. I place the bathroom pass back onto the chalk-holder and flop into my seat. Mrs. Buffalo Head repeats the question that apparently no one has

answered yet. I glance around at the other kids (most of their faces expressionless) while rubbing the corner of my Holt science textbook covered with a brown paper bag. Should I let them in on my secret? A corner of the book has already nestled its way past the paper bag covering. On the inner flap, I scribble back and forth on top of the Scotch tape until the tape bits get stuck on my pencil lead. I shouldn’t keep my amazing discovery to myself. My waving hand catches her attention and the words spill out of my mouth when I’m finally given the permission to answer. “Humans are different because we have theme songs and the animals don’t.” I think I’ll take my praise now, thank you.

“Apparently, Vivian has decided to be funny today and I don’t think she’s amusing anyone but herself. Maybe you shouldn’t watch TV so much, dear. Now who wants to give Mrs. Bubbalow the real answer before the bell rings?”

Real answer? That is the real answer. It bothers me that she always says “Mrs. Bubbalow” instead of just “me.” It’s as if the real Mrs. Bubbalow is sitting at the back of the classroom asking the question while this lady teaching class is merely asking the question for her. I guess that’s what you do when you’re grown up; you refer to yourself as if you weren’t really you.

Her remarks to me didn’t sound like the kind of praise I was expecting. Okay, maybe she’ll remember to tell me how insightful my answer is in a second. But that’s it. Nothing. It was as if the picture of the long-tusked elephant on the bulletin board marked “Africa” in bubble letters had just stuck his thick leg out and crushed me underfoot with a clear “thud” sound. I start to count how many thin brown lines make up the fake wood grain on my desk. Fifth grade teachers can’t hear as well as I can, anyway, since their ears are older and only trained to hear the sounds they’ve already heard.

“Humans are different from mammals because we’re civilized and we can read and write,” Steven G. says cheerfully (the kind of cheerful that comes from knowing you have the right answer because that’s what the Holt science book says). I’m glad I hit him in the head with the kickball yesterday during recess. Maybe his brain will come loose from getting hit and



I'll find out that it wasn't really a brain lodged up there, just a Holt science book.

"Very good!" says Mrs. Buffalo Head, obviously pleased she has at least one student who can regurgitate text information. The end of the day bell (older ears pick up this sound well) jolts my class out of its routine. We pick up our sacks within a second (since all of us have been quietly zipping up our bags and putting on our sweaters for the past two minutes anyway). The noise of all of the zippers together just makes her pretend that much harder that she can't hear us packing up to go. There's a traffic jam at the doorway and I finally squeeze my way out.

I wasn't "being funny" like Mrs. Buffalo Head thought—there really are theme songs. She was just thinking about the wrong kind of theme song. I guess she thought I meant a theme song as in Barry Manilow songs like my dad listens to in his car or the Star Wars theme song. What I meant was the kind of theme song that everyone emits from the pores in their skin. You can hear it if you know the person well enough. And if you listen closely. I can't wait to test my new discovery again. I hurry out of the school and away from the other students, all of us looking like ants rushing away from our above ground mound.

I first noticed it yesterday afternoon when Mom asked me to play. Didn't feel much like practicing piano, but I pulled the wrinkly sheet music from my blue Burrage folder anyway. The quarter notes skipped around on the page, sticking their tongues out and teasing me (they like to do that when I'm trying especially hard to be serious). I ignored their jests and began with my B-flat scale, pressing my fingerprints onto the ivory. Bb C D Eb F G A Bb. Bb C D Eb F G A Bb. The sounds were monotonous and predictable. As a rule, I always put in my own H's in the scales where I thought they should go. I left them a space, but I wouldn't play a sound for it on my scale. The newness of this, however, didn't last long. My fingertips continued their heavy dance while my thoughts drifted away into the Place of Boredom where only bored people can enter. Bb C D Eb F G A Bb. Bb C D E E F G. The old mailbox hanging on the outside of our door squeaked shut. Bb C D E E F G. Glancing down at my fingers, I notice that they're not making this new noise, but it's definitely the timbre of a piano, and to a ragtime tune. Quickly I push the piano bench to the front door and climb on top of the bench to look out of the glass in the upper portion of the door. It's Jack. He was one of the first people I met when we moved here before I got old like I am now. I think I was four. He would always look at me when he was talking to my family—not just my mom and dad. A lot of other adults would just say "Hi little girl" and talk to my parents as if I wasn't even there. Little? Babies are little. I'm tall, and I probably know more than they did when they were my age. Anyway, Jack's back faced me and he walked away

with his mail bag in a shuffling manner. Bb C D E E F G. I visually frisked him as best I could, checking for any radios or instruments on his body, and then rechecked my own hands to make sure that they hadn't played a trick on me. Mom called me and waved goodbye since I wouldn't be awake by the time she got back. Grandmother would be looking out for me that night instead. I lost Jack's melody just in time to see him cross the street.

Two curled brown leaves sail into my path and bring my mind out of its wandering. Oops—I forgot to look both ways. A boxy brown car's wheels scream at me telling me to get out of the way. Jolted, I race to the other side of the street even though I realize that it won't run over me. Safe on the other side, I'm careful not to step on any cracks since Mom doesn't have the money to pay for back surgery and I like her anyway. So I think about my grandmother instead and try to break her back on the pavement.

Grandmother has lips that could outdo a grouper. They're very thin and very stern, always turned down at the corners. She stayed with us for a week to talk to Dad or something.

"What do you want to be when you grow up, Viv?" She asked. Something silly like that always came out of her grouper mouth.

"Be a panda," I said, hanging upside down on the couch. Making sure she saw me, I rotated my feet in the air just to annoy her. I stared at the few blue veins tracing her left arm. She gave off this odd kind of clarinet music that sounded like it was being cranked from an old record player with the megaphone attached. It was squealy on the higher notes, and slightly annoying after a while. I felt like I should dust her off, but there was no dust to be found.

"You can't be a panda," she said, like she had no understanding of what I was talking about. Adults do that sometimes; they ask you what you want to be and then say you can't do that. I humored her this time, though.

"Okay then, I want to be the person who puts the stickers on all those bananas." That would be neat. To be in charge of all of that fruit.

She sat down on the couch next to me and tapped my upside down legs. That was her way of telling me to move them.

"Why don't you sit like you're supposed to? You'll get a blood clot in your head by tomorrow if you keep sitting like that." I finally adhered to gravity and to Grandmother. Returning my feet to the ground, I mimicked the way she sat. Time to change the subject.

"Can Toby spend the night tonight?"

"Honey, no, he can't stay over here." She gave a canned answer so she wouldn't actually have to think about it. Silly clarinet-sounding-grouper-mouth Grandmother.

"But he's my best friend. I stay over there all of the

time in the day. The only difference is that it's dark and we'd be over here. The girls who I don't even like that much can spend the night. So why can't he?"

"Because people sometimes don't like boys and girls to sleep in the same room. It bothers them."

"Why? That's stupid. He's my best friend; I don't care if anyone else spends the night, they're boring." Frustrated, I ran my fingers across the piano top.

"I wish he could. But not everyone lives under the same rules and I can't do anything about that."

She could do everything about that.

I keep walking home from school, scanning sidewalk cracks, and readjusting my backpack until I see the familiar stone house, always looking like a tiny castle to me. The familiar house is not my own, but Toby's house. Little ivy vines slowly reel their way up the stone walls. Their railing is wobbly and I never hold on to it very tightly on my way up the stairs. Feeling at home here, I twist the metal doorknob and walk right in.

Suddenly, I'm attacked on my left side and pushed to the floor. Toby wrestles me but doesn't get very far. We roll around on the floor until I manage to grab his hands.

"Give up," I say. He stops fidgeting and I can loosen my grip.

"No way!" He spurts, digging his fingers into the sides of my ribs.

"No tickling! That's not fair!" Finishing the word "fair" is impossible now, and all I can do is laugh. He's pulling the laughs from deep in my throat. The irises of Toby's blue eyes meet mine and I can hear all different kinds of drums. Even cymbals. Everything crashing around. Like watching things spin in a washing machine.

"Ple—" I gasp. He's still tickling me between the same two ribs. I can't even escape by thrashing around. "Stop."

Finally. His pincers release me and I roll onto my stomach. My muscles feel red. "That's for telling me to give up," Toby says victoriously. I punch him hard in the arm for winning today's match. My arms are tensed, waiting for his comeback. "Mom says I shouldn't hit girls." He looks serious.

"That's stupid. What am I going to do, break?" Great. Score one for the adults. So I hit him again, in the exact same place.

"Cut it out." Gladly he hits me back, both of us smiling. "You've got really weird music, Viv." We'd never said a word about the music before. But I knew that he'd heard these theme songs, too. It was just a given between us.

"Don't keep me waiting," I say anxiously. I have never heard my own music since I am its source.

Brushing his sandy blonde bangs out of his face Toby began, "you know those bell things, the zylo..."

"Xylophones, yeah."

"It sounds like a whole bunch of those notes being struck at the same time."

I wonder what the two of us together must sound like to someone else who could hear our music. The percussion and the xylophone. Maybe that's why we get along so well.

6:30 already.

"I've got to go." We exit back down the stairs. He waves bye to me and I turn to go back home. I could really like him (not just like him) if we were older.

Cutting across the I-shaped garden in the neighbor's yard where a few wilted plants remain, I hurry towards our door. The setting sun reflects off the glass in the door making me squint.

Mom's waiting for me today since she's off from the chiropractor place where she works. Usually she's booked up all day seeing patients. She straightens backs, which is funny because I've never seen anyone with a back shaped like a bass clef that needed to be

fixed. I walk into our house ready to see what kind of seeping music she gives off. She gives me a hug, and afterwards I deliberately escape to the couch in the opposite corner of where she sits at the table. I furtively watch her as she writes notes to herself for tomorrow's big meeting with the People Who Talk Too Much. Her music rushes over to me quickly in the form of deep, resonating tones of a cello. It coats my eardrum. Her melody line is rich and soaks into the furniture in the living room. The sound is like





how she spoke to me when I was a baby. Unlike my voice, stretched and pleading, hers was like the soft black sand of Hawaii I'd seen on TV. Smooth and low. Her sound braided itself around the legs of the table and I . . .

Slam. Dad's home. The sudden movement of the door whisks me out of the short trance. Mom continues her scribbling.

"Hiya kiddo," he says, tugging on the arm of my sweatshirt. He smells like a big coffee bean. Mom looks up from her work and lets out a smile.

He walks tentatively to his own Work Space to set down his briefcase that resembles the People Who Talk Too Much's briefcases. He chucks his keys on the coffee table close to my feet. There's his key chain with the airplane on it. Not a full-sized airplane, I mean a one inch model of one. Dad's boss from the airline gave it to him before the boss flew off to live in Texas with "a woman that was bad for him." Oops—I have a piano lesson tomorrow after school.

Music. I almost forgot to try and hear Dad's music. Time to scheme once again. I pretend that I'm going to practice.

"Mom, where did you put my scale chart?" She doesn't hear me, but I find it on the arm of the couch.

I try to clear my head again and listen as Dad comes back from his Work Space, probably to get a soda. He itches his hands on the way there and again on the way back. Undoes the tiny buttons on the cuffs of his light blue dress shirt from underneath his sweater. By the time he returns from the kitchen I've cleared my head. He gives me a quick wink. Nothing. I don't hear any music at all yet. His must be fantastic if it's so hard to hear. This would be a challenge.

I try harder, blocking out the sounds of a radio and the scratching pen noises. I stare at his wavy graying hair before he goes out of view and wait to be hit with his unique melody. Nothing.

The notion of Dad being some kind of an animal (after all, theme songs are what separate us from them, I think) quickly comes and leaves. Nope, he couldn't pass as anything other than human. Maybe I just don't know him well enough. I'm sure he has one. I get up from the piano bench and peer into his Work Space. No music. Even our mailman has a theme song.

"Dad," I yell. He looks up, surprised by my zeal. "Where's your theme song?" I can't keep the game to myself anymore.

"Viv, what are you talking about?" Toby would understand. Dad's eyes reveal guilt of something greater than what I'm asking.

Frantically. "I can't hear it. You're not some kind of machine. You can't be broken. You must have a melody line—you're a regular part of my life." The elephant's foot comes down on my head and the boxy car's wheels scream. I need a laminator to dive into right now. To have the warm translucence cover me,

protecting me from what's wrong. Silence.

"Where is it?"

Dad's eyes fill up like my aquariums with new water. He holds my wrists and looks at me.

No music.

"I'm sorry." He is earnest and strangely enough, whimpering. "I'm so sorry you can't hear my theme song." I'm surprised he's taking me this seriously, but glad. He crouches from his seated position in front of his desk and I see new wrinkles on his face. His arms are around me. My face is squished against his sweater and I'm breathing through my mouth since my nostrils don't work at the moment. I can't quite hear his heart beating, but I know that it is. Why is he hugging me so tightly? Maybe he wants to squeeze my theme song out of me so he can remember what one sounds like. Accidentally, my tongue hangs out and I get a taste of the fuzzy sweater, jerking me away from him.

"I can't hear it either." He lets go and hurries to the bathroom. Running water is heard from behind the bathroom door.

Sitting down in my father's wooden chair, I wipe off the tip of my tongue and wait for the redness in my face to swell down. My brain wrestles with what I should do while I'm in this awkward position. His blue notepad. I scan down his notes to occupy my mind, thinking they're from work.

Ellan,

I'm sorry that I can't work this out. I know we've tried to fix this before, but I need to fly away for a while. Please don't try and contact me—I need to straighten out how I feel. Tell Vivian to keep up her piano playing. I will miss you both.

Love,

Harris

The running water from the bathroom sink stops. I stare at the writing, the letters going out of focus and back again. He returns to find the blue notepad in my lap. He tries to form words to cover his embarrassment, and finally his lips close.

My father becomes the H.

Leigh Palmer

N. Scott Momaday's *In the Presence of the Sun: Stories and Poems*  
1961-1991

With his latest book of poems, stories, and illustrations, Scott Momaday gives us a dazzling variety of subjects and forms. *In the Presence of the Sun* serves as an example of poetry's incantatory possibilities.

Drawing from his Kiowa heritage, Momaday describes the ceremonial dances his ancestors performed and he helps to keep alive: "the rhythmic scraping of the red earth." The formality of dance takes its place alongside the formality of memorial chants ("Plainview: 2") and love chants ("The Delight Song of the Tsoaitalee"). There's even a ceremony for the reader. "A Gathering of Shields," sixteen short stories about the shields of Plains warriors, is meant to be read aloud, one story a day, with fasting on days four, eight, twelve, and sixteen. "The stories ought to be told in the early morning or late afternoon, when the sun is close to the horizon, and always in the presence of the sun."

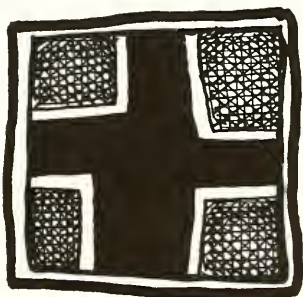
But English poetry, too, has roots in magical ceremony. In the Seventeenth Century, poets such as Ben Jonson and Robert Herrick were equally skillful with charms and with epigrams so scathing they amount to curses. Momaday proves that the gleefully spiteful tradition of the English epigram is alive and thriving. Consider "On Futility," which consists of two lines: "He worked hard and was rewarded. / His reward is here recorded." The rest of the page is blank.

In the trendy circles that care more about posing than poetry, it has been fashionable for the past few decades to treat received form as a fascist structure, because Christopher Marlowe and Andrew Marvell were white men. Many non-white or non-male poets (Derek Walcott, Marilyn Hacker) understand its power, though, and instead of renouncing it have grasped its strength for use in their own work. Scott Momaday adds a Native American name to this list. The wide range of forms in this book includes free verse, peaceful landscapes in iambic pentameter couplets ("Plainview: 1") and chilling post-Apocalyptic visions based on the accented meter of Old English ("The Burning"). There are also two substantial sequences. "The Strange and True Story of My Life with Billy the Kid" is a series of twenty-one short stories and poems (Billy the Kid "is said to have killed twenty-one men, one for each year of his life"). The spooky poem

number twenty-one, "Two Figures," occurs at both the introduction and the end: "These figures moving in my rhyme, / Who are they? Death and Death's dog, Time."

The sixteen-part sequence "A Gathering of Shields" is the most impressive part of the book. The stories of the shields, rich in concrete detail, involve mythical times and creatures, high adventure, ghosts, and sordid history. Like the weapons of Greek and Arthurian epics, these shields are living objects of immense emotional power. Plains warriors decorated their shields as works of art. Momaday describes more than the appearance of the shields—he reveals how they came to be and what became of them. Even their titles are intriguing: "The Shield That Came Back," "The Shield That Died," "The Shield of Which the Less Said the Better."

*In the Presence of the Sun* is, for the most part, a wonderfully produced book. Printed on creamy, rough-edged paper, it features sixty illustrations by the author. The only quibble I have with its production is that in "The Colors of Night" short prose is printed with a wide and unjustified right margin, so it looks like poetry with klutzy line breaks. A poet as accomplished as Scott Momaday ought not to be exposed to that kind of misapprehension.





San San Lee

## Literature Contest Judge Fall, 1992

**Mary Ellis Gibson**

Mary Ellis Gibson received her B.A. in English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, her M.A. and Ph.D. in English Language and Literature from the University of Chicago. She is currently an Associate Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where she teaches Women's Studies, Victorian Literature, and Literary Theory, among others. She has published poetry, critical articles on nineteenth and twentieth-century women writers, including a study of Robert Browning's poetry entitled *History and the Prism of Art: Browning's Poetic Experiments*. Dr. Gibson has also served as Editor for two major collections of fiction: *New Stories by Southern Women*, and most recently, *Homeplaces: Stories of the South by Women Writers*, both published by the University of South Carolina Press.

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